Sunday, February 23, 2003
MORE THAN YOU ASKED FOR
Mark 2:1-12

I am going to begin this sermon with a very important announcement. It's an announcement that many of you who came here today did not expect to hear, and therefore it could be more than you asked for. For others of you who are hearing this sermon, the announcement that I am about to make could be something you are sure you don't need to hear. And for still others, the announcement that I am about to make could surprise you, but it's one that could bring a great sense of relief to you. Here's the announcement: GOOD FRIENDS, YOUR SINS ARE FORGIVEN!

In today's story from the Gospel of Mark, a group of friends are convinced they know what their paralyzed companion needs. He needs healing. He is paralyzed and has been for some time, so paralyzed that he cannot walk. His friends also believe that Jesus will be able to heal him. Unfortunately, knowing about Jesus and getting next to him are two different things. According to the story, there were so many people gathered around the home where Jesus was that there was no longer room for anyone. Even the front door was blocked. People were standing six deep and more.

How were these four friends going to get their paralyzed companion on the stretcher through the crowd? But determined fellows that they were — not the kind of friends who give up easily — they were resolute that nothing was going to block them. They didn't put down the stretcher and say, "Tough luck, my friend, we tried, but we could not get through." They found another way. They went around the crowd. They literally went over their heads onto the roof. They were able to make an opening in the flat roof and let their companion down right in front of Jesus.

When all this was done, they probably thought their worries were over. They had gotten him this far. Now it was up to Jesus. In the same way that he healed so many people before, he would surely help their friend. But Jesus' response may have surprised them.

Jesus looked at the man and said, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Forgiveness is good to have, but the man on the stretcher and those who had brought him were likely thinking, "That's not why we brought our friend here. We carried him here so that his paralysis would be healed and he would be able to walk again. What's all this business about forgiveness of sins?"

The man on the stretcher and his friends were not the only ones who were surprised. The religious authorities who were watching were stunned. They said, "What's Jesus talking about? It's blasphemy. Only God can forgive sins." The friends and the man who was paralyzed wanted a healer. The religious authorities wanted a law-abider. Jesus took the role of God, offering what God offers: forgiving sins and healing the man totally. It was more than anyone asked for.

That's what I was saying at the beginning of this sermon. You have come to this time of worship with many different needs, and hopefully, you will get more than you asked for. Maybe you're here because it's one of your good habits to attend regularly without thinking very much about why you come here. You don't think about what to ask for or what you might receive. Then you heard the announcement—"Good friends, your sins are forgiven." Maybe you

thought, “Forgiveness? I didn’t know I needed forgiveness. I didn’t come here for that. I came hoping to hear a sermon with a few good points that I can remember during the next week.”

For you and for many, forgiveness seems a bit old-fashioned. If you keep out of trouble, do your best at home and at work, if you live a respectable life and mind your own business — why do you need forgiveness? And maybe this week you don’t need much forgiveness. However, it’s still comforting to know that God forgives you even for those sins you might not be aware of. It also can be a reminder that there could be people who are waiting for you to forgive them. Furthermore, to talk about God’s constant forgiveness is another way of describing God’s goodness.

The story is reminding you that God’s will for you is wholeness and healing — healing of body, mind, and spirit — and that always includes forgiveness. So here Jesus first speaks not exactly a word of healing, but a word of forgiveness because they are connected. In the ancient world, illness was often thought to be the consequence of sin. Forgiveness, then, was regarded as a precondition to healing. That sometimes is the case. Jesus announces forgiveness, and the healing begins.

Remember also that Mark’s gospel tells you that this man was paralyzed. There are many forms and causes of paralysis even today. I know people who are literally paralyzed because of their guilt. They need to hear the good news of forgiveness.

Paralysis is a very descriptive metaphor. You can be paralyzed in your thinking and need to be forgiven for your stubbornness. You refuse to consider any new ideas. You can be paralyzed by inaction. You are afraid to try anything new. You’ve given up. You can be paralyzed in your beliefs. You can be paralyzed by fear. You can be caught in the paralysis of grief and refuse to work through it. You can be paralyzed by hate, revenge, and even self-hatred. Those are all things that need forgiveness. I even know people who are paralyzed by their stinginess and greed. There are many people who need to hear the good news that they have been forgiven and then accept that true healing is possible.

That’s the first major theme in this healing story — the connection between forgiveness and healing, especially the healing from many kinds of paralysis.

A second theme in this story, and why the early church remembered it, is because of the four friends who carried their paralyzed companion to Jesus. These four friends represent what happens in all of life. They stand for the bearers, the caring people throughout all of history, those individuals who have had persistent faith and who work on, many times anonymously, carrying you, intervening on your behalf, helping you to places where you do not want to go, praying for you, cheering you on. And when all the usual openings are blocked, they create a new one. For example, the Stephen Ministers in our congregation and in other churches are doing what these four friends did.

Such people have been and still are important in the lives and backgrounds of all of you. They are the ones who frequently work behind the scenes, who do not get into the spotlight, or have their names on the marquee, who do not get credit most of the time, and who are often forgotten. Sometimes these people are mentioned briefly in the preface of a book or listed in the credits at the end of a program.

The faith of others, their carrying power, their persistence, is present in the life of each one of you hearing this sermon. Many of these people have been long forgotten by you, and there are some whose names you will never know.

A woman who had been a patient in one of the hospitals in Lincoln, and at one point almost died, told me after she recovered that she was surprised to learn how many people were praying for her healing. She learned through some of her friends, each of whom had other friends in this church and in other congregations, who were connected to prayer groups and prayer chains — all were praying for her.

You can carry and you are carried by others in so many ways. The word of encouragement at an early age or at any time, the pat on the back, the arm around the shoulder, the listening to a difficult problem, the touch of tenderness in a time of grief, the letter or note that arrived at the right time, the friendly phone call, the knowledge that someone cares and is thinking of you — all of you have lived and are still supported by the love, faith, and persistence of others, like the four friends in this story. The faith of others contributes to the miracles that take place in your life. This story from Mark's gospel says: "When Jesus saw their faith," the faith of the friends who brought the man to him.

These four friends who carried the paralyzed man, and others like them in your life and mine, do what they do because they trust in the goodness of God. When they see someone suffering, they don't simply accept that suffering as God's will. Nor do they play the "blame the victim" game and try to think of all the ways in which the paralytic produced his own plight. They believe that God's will for you is wholeness and health. They see suffering and they say to themselves, "God doesn't want this. It doesn't have to be this way. We're going to do our best to see that you are healed." It is their faith that contributes to our healing.

William Sloane Coffin, in his book The Living of These Days, tells how much the faith of others meant to him during his mental breakdown when he had no faith of his own, when he had given up. He was carried by others who cared. It was the faith of others that pulled him through.

There's one more theme in this story. Mark writes: "They could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd." It doesn't seem possible. You would think that the crowd would let the four men through who were carrying the stretcher with the paralyzed man.

It still happens today. Many times crowds get in the way of people who are in need. When firefighters are trying to get to a burning building, crowds can get in their way. When there is an auto accident or some other kind of tragedy, how often do crowds gather in curiosity and make it difficult for those who are there to provide medical assistance?

Church congregations, even our own, can get in the way of people who come here seeking spiritual renewal. The regular members can become so intent on their own search for finding God and greeting old friends, that you miss the new person who is looking for a word of welcome and comfort.

A person said to me recently, "Remember, every visitor to your church has a reason for coming that day. They are looking for something — for healing, for forgiveness, for a smile or a kind word."

Not only do groups of people sometimes unwittingly block others who are seeking to experience the healing presence of God, but there can be other barriers as well. Many church buildings are inaccessible to those in wheelchairs or who have other physical differences. First-Plymouth has made progress in these matters, but we still need to be sensitive to the many little and big ways we might be a barrier to someone who is looking for healing and forgiveness.

“When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, ‘Son, your sins are forgiven.’” Only five words, but their meaning is inexhaustible. With those words, he was saying, “I care about you. God loves you. God forgives you. The friends who brought you here care about you. Whatever sin or guilt or whatever else is paralyzing you, you are now free.”

The same is true for each one of you here today. Good friends, your sins are forgiven. I hope this is more than you asked for. Amen.